



# Indignação and declaração corporal: Luta and activism in Brazil during the times of the pandemic

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*Indignação and declaração corporal: Luta and activism in Brazil during the times of the pandemic*

ABSTRACT

In this article, we interrogate *vergonha alheia* [shame on behalf of others; or “vicarious embarrassment”], which is experienced when viewing an embarrassing action from the outside. We question if shame – associated with the worst of human behaviour brought about and made visible by the COVID-19 pandemic – can ignite a new kind of cultural sensitivity to the pain of others. Turning to the work of several feminist scholars, we reveal the generative power of shame in artistic and political mobilization. We study examples of artistic activism (i.e., activism) during the COVID-19 pandemic, as presented by two Brazilian women – Adriana Calcanhotto and Debora Diniz. By intimately engaging with their work and situating it in the context of the popular feminist struggle in Brazil – i.e., *a luta* [the struggle], we discern two performative patterns articulated through distinct symbolic utterances: *indignação* and *declaração corporal* [indignation and bodily declaration]. We contend that these utterances help overcome individual apathy, summon radically different forms of sensitivity and meaning making that may initiate potentially transformative shifts in public perceptions of social justice. We conclude with our reflections on how feminist activism in Latin America not only questions the validity of the abstract, universal, and modern human being but also reveals new frames of progress.

Key words: feminism, activism, art, Brazil, Latin America, (de)colonial

## Introduction

Around the world, feminist activism has increased in size, visibility, and resonance. Feminist activism has been growing its membership, expanding its battlegrounds, generating new activities, and interrogating the very ethos of the feminist struggle. In the last decade, a myriad of feminist undertakings – including women’s marches, the International Women’s Strike, and social movements like #Metoo and #NiUnaMenos – have called attention to chronic problems of violence and inequality in the area of gender relations. It is noteworthy that feminism – once holding a minority position that raised much suspicion – now positions “diversity [as] a strength rather than [a] weakness”, thus allowing the emergence of a “feminism of the masses” (Gago, 2019, p. 3). However, this development in Latin America is marked by a strong ambiguity: its growth is paralleled by the highest rates of violence and brutality against women in the region (Souza, 2019).<sup>1</sup> According to Gago (2020), ambiguity stems from the character of protest activities, which are no longer guided by “academic, elitist, or just plain corporate” interests (p. 7). These activities now emerge in the streets of Latin America, shaped by the people directly affected by the “new wars against women’s bodies” (Segato, 2014, p. 90).

A global sanitary crisis has demonstrated the entanglement of bodily and social fragility in the face of calamity. It has exposed unfathomable realities of those who have been confronting the COVID-19 pandemic in societies governed by a patriarchal order, as well as by religious and racial exclusion/segregation inherited from colonial times. The passionate words of Arundhati Roy (2020) concerning the context of India can also be applied to places like Brazil: “As an appalled world watched, India revealed itself in all her shame – her brutal, structural, social and economic inequality, her callous indifference to suffering” (para. 24).

Following the outcry of Arundhati Roy (2020), we address the nature of shame – specifically, the type of shame known in Portuguese as *vergonha alheia* [shame on behalf of others; also, vicarious embarrassment]. Shame is a multifaceted concept commonly used in social psychology (e.g., Goffman, 1959), as a type of emotion that instigates the construction of socially agreeable self-presentations, and in moral philosophy (e.g., Buber, 1957), as a type of existential experience that defines the capacity of an individual for empathetic action. We draw on the latter understanding of shame to expose how individuals react to injustices that may not directly affect their well-being but are considered intolerable – morally objectionable injustices that call for a response. According to cultural historian Tiffany Watt Smith (2015), *vergonha alheia* focuses on actions that are embarrassing to watch from the outside. Watt Smith (2015) contends that *vergonha alheia* is a paradoxical feeling of embarrassment: on the one hand, *vergonha alheia* reflects ridicule and exclusion, but on the other, *vergonha alheia* also expresses empathy – putting oneself in the shoes of the other. Watt Smith (2015) also asserts that these seemingly contradictory impulses not only signal the importance of the group over the individual but also reveal why, according to some linguists, it was Spanish and Portuguese speakers who coined this type of emotion.

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<sup>1</sup> A study from the Institute of High International Studies in Geneva, Switzerland, shows that Latin American countries account for more than half of the 25 countries with the highest rates of femicide (País por país, 2016).

While it is true that the crisis created by the COVID-19 pandemic has brought out the best in some – including feelings of solidarity and recognizing the importance of care workers, it has also brought out the worst in others. Political gambles, social privilege abuses, quarantine shaming, stigmatization, xenophobia, and the use of the pandemic by government as a cover for the destruction of the Amazon are all apparent in the context of Brazil. Can shame about the worst in human behaviour that has been brought on – and revealed – by this pandemic also create a new kind of cultural sensitivity to a politically-induced and “callous indifference to suffering” (Roy, 2020, p. 24)?

The history of art illustrates how feeling shame on behalf of others – a personal and intimate emotional experience that is often concealed or suppressed (Buber, 1957) – can serve as a powerful catalyst for creative utterances that can topple the walls of heartless indifference and pierce the bubble of cowardly silence (Sontag, 2003). In terms of the political realm, Montesquieu (2011) drew our attention to emotions and desires that can be at the core of liberation. Arendt (1957) revealed how shame powers the courage to speak – voicing the unutterable and bringing to light inconvenient truths and the need for joint action. And today, social media functions as a platform and repository for anger, where individuals are free to release self-righteous indignation. But shame can also be articulated by – and ‘lived through’ – the affective impetus of daring artistic undertakings: shame stirs creative eruptions of empathy that not only confront the power of grief but also spring to life in the psyche and in the body.

Throughout history, artists and writers have expressed their interpretation of human suffering during times of hardship, which begs the question: how might they contribute to our understanding of individual experience and social life during the COVID-19 crisis? We contend that methodological disruption elicited by artistic interrogations of the pandemic come from two sources. First, artistic representation of social reality as “beautiful, ugly, kitsch, grotesque, tragic [or sacred]” creates a form of primary knowledge that offers its “own (inconvenient) truth” (Strati, 1996, p. 216) and that transforms knowing subjects into sympathizing or reactionary ones (Kenny & Fotaki, 2015). Second, artistic representation prompts affective engagement with others, thus shifting research practice from a purely scientific endeavour to one that is humanistic in nature (Doherty, 2013).

To reveal the generative possibilities of shame, we study examples of feminist artistic activism (i.e., artivism) during the COVID-19 pandemic. We draw from the endeavours of two Brazilian women – Adriana Calcanhotto, Brazilian singer-songwriter, and Debora Diniz, author, documentarian, and Professor of Law at the University of Brasilia. Intimately engaging with their work and situating it in the context of the popular feminist struggle in Brazil known as *a luta* [the struggle], we focus on two analytical concepts observed in our findings: *indignação* and *declaração corporal* [indignation and body declaration]. Drawing on *indignação*, we illustrate how feminist art can provide a politically charged form of social sensitivity in times of crisis. And by utilizing *declaração corporal*, we reveal how the (artistic) mobilization of female bodies can help individuals move beyond the embodiment of oppression and use their bodies as active instruments in declaring (and affirming) new existential, social, and political meanings unleashed by the pandemic.

We structure our analysis over four sections. First, we offer a short overview of extant literature on art and organization studies. Second, we describe the historical origins of Latin American activism – articulated and situated in local struggles for social justice – and, in particular, *Artivismo Feminista* [feminist activism]. Third, we present two examples of activism, created and performed by Adriana Calcanhotto and Debora Diniz during the COVID-19 pandemic. We offer our interpretation of how *indignação* and *declaração corporal*, accentuated in the work of both artists, help overcome individual apathy, summon radically different forms of civic awareness, and initiate potentially transformative shifts in public perceptions of social justice. We conclude with our reflections on how feminist activism in Latin America interrogates the validity of an abstract, universal, and modern human being and how it reveals new frames of progress.

### **Arts and organization studies**

The importance of an aesthetic perspective in unveiling hitherto hidden aspects of social organizing and its oppressive structures has been highlighted by several organizational scholars, such as Doherty (2013) and Kenny and Fotaki (2015). While the visual arts, film, and theatre offer plentiful insights into the human condition of marginalized groups, there is a paucity of evidence offered by organization scholars and practitioners that addresses the perceptions and feelings of individuals living outside the realm of privilege (Doherty, 2013). The relative absence of an arts or humanities perspective in the study of social reality appears to reflect the dominance of a technical or a scientifically-inspired view of organizing over an aesthetic one (Dobson, 1999).

In the last decade of the 20th century, scholars have, however, begun to acknowledge the importance of an aesthetic perspective in organizational studies. For example, Sandelands and Bruckner (1989) argued that art works can evoke aesthetic experiences, and that these experiences can provide useful insights into the ‘feelings of work’, as opposed to the ‘feelings about work’. In a study that contrasted the perspectives of managers and artists regarding the Great Depression, Doherty (2013) illustrated how an artistic perspective was much more revelatory, empathetic, and accurate in its representation of the groups that suffered the most during that period. Artists spoke to the society at large, while managers pondered the design and functioning of organizations in the abstract, seemingly exempt from emotional honesty. Developing insights offered by Doherty (2013), Kenny and Fotaki (2015) uncovered how an aesthetic representation of traumatic experiences and emotions in different contexts – including organizations – could pave the way for an emergent corporeal ethics of relationality built around compassion and co-existence.

In Brazil, the arts have been used as a strategic resource to not only promote but also legitimise the rescue of national cultural identity. Inspired by the postmodernist tradition that emerged in Western social thought in the second half of the 20th century, Brazilian researchers have been using various aesthetic lenses to articulate their arguments, reinforce their conclusions, and create new metaphors and forms of representation to subvert dogmatic rigidity in the so-called ‘high science’ of management (Faria & Collares, 2001).

One of the few courageous incursions by Brazilian academics has been the rescue and transposition of artistic anthropophagy to an area in organisational studies – *organisational anthropophagy* (Wood & Caldas, 1998). The efforts of Wood and Caldas (1998) have centred on the creation of

an anthropophagic dynamic based on the idea of “devouring”, a practice observed in both academia and organisations in Brazil. Defending the idea that non-conformist researchers embrace *Macunaíma*<sup>2</sup>, an Amerindian hero, known as “a hero without a character”, created by Brazilian modernist writer Mario de Andrade (1928) and constituting a well-established symbol of Brazilian national identity and a product of Brazilian cultural imagination (Ribeiro, 1999), Wood and Caldas (1998) sought to represent a more realistic expression of the original anthropophagic ethos. Faria and Collares (2001) broadened this approach by shifting from the identification of who is – or should be – devoured (i.e., the foreigner) to the identification of which tribal rituals and theories give meaning to the practice of anthropophagy. According to Faria and Collares (2001), the main difference between tribal studies and organisational anthropophagy was that the arts exposed consistent insubordination to the functionalist logic of management, while formal educational institutions and organisations recognized the appropriation of the original anthropophagic movement by local, ruling elites through business organisations and “the market”.

### **The symbiosis of feminist activism and art (artivism) in Latin America**

In the 1960s and 1970s, Latin American art was profoundly marked and restrained by dictatorships. The end of dictatorship rule in most parts of the region in the 1980s allowed academic realms, institutions, museums, galleries, and culture centres to begin a slow – albeit steady – awakening to certain realities in a much more incisive way. Artists began to claim spaces and means to convey radically different meanings and representations.

Especially in Brazil, iconoclastic and expressive explorations of explicitly local subjects and themes – inspired and nourished by the vision of the modernist movement of the 1920s – achieved great vitality in the 1980s. This movement transformed the aesthetic context of the day by generating and exposing artistic productions that sought to subvert European aesthetic standards and present a renewed creative language – a language intent on breaking the Brazilian art paradigm of the past (Nascimento, 2015). The legacy of the modernist movement in the art scene of a post-dictatorship Brazil also reiterates the importance of the social function of art and the civic engagement of the artist. The persistent influence of this vision on the Brazilian contemporary art scene highlights that socio-political concerns have always been one of its main characteristics (Chaia, 2007).

Throughout the history of art in Latin America, there have been women who have exercised individual and creative freedoms that were neither expected nor commonplace for their gender. In addition to women who – at the end of the 19th and during the first half of the 20th century – fought for rights of citizenship or formed early feminist movements, there were artists who created works that can now be interpreted in relation to feminist art theory (Peña et al., 2017). These artists may not have considered themselves feminists nor formed part of these movements. However, they and their various streams of artistic endeavours have a unifying theme – the centrality of the body in

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<sup>2</sup> We refer to the novel of Mário de Andrade, *Macunaíma* (1928), which he wrote during his ‘anthropophagic period’. In *Macunaíma*, the reader encounters an aesthetic project in which the experience of colonialism emerges in different pieces and fragments. However, *Macunaíma* is not entirely the creation of de Andrade as it first referred to an Amerindian mythological character. De Andrade seemingly (re)constructs the character at the intersection of different subaltern experiences that are part of the colonial history of Brazil – intertwining Amerindian indigeneity with blackness, with problematic signifiers of otherness (Silva, 2018).

articulating a creative motive and/or a political stance. Thus, art historians identify two distinct categories of artistic activism by women. On the one hand, *feminist aesthetic politics* refers to artists engaged in any strain of feminism and whose creations or actions produce politically- and socially-committed art where feminism is understood as a form of thought and action (Peña et al., 2017). On the other, *gender aesthetics* refers to female artists who – out of ignorance or by choice – do not use the term feminist but whose work can be analysed in terms of feminism insofar as it reveals issues such as the vulnerability of women, as well as injustice and violence against women (Peña et al., 2017). One of the most notorious examples of gender aesthetics artists is Tarsila do Amaral and her iconic painting *Abaporu*.

### Insert Figure 1 here

The word, *Abaporu* [the man who eats men], is formed from *abá* [man], *poro* [people], and *u* [to eat] in Tupi-Guarani, the language of a Brazilian tribe living on the Atlantic coast when the Portuguese first arrived in the 1500s. Tarsila do Amaral created this painting in 1928 as a birthday gift for her husband Oswald de Andrade, one of the founders of the modernist movement in Brazil. A few months later that same year, it would serve as both inspiration and illustration in Oswald de Andrade's *Manifesto Antropófago* [Anthropophagic Manifesto] aimed at creating the *Anthropophagic Movement* that sought to “swallow” European culture and digest it into something uniquely Brazilian (Islam, 2012). The painting is a body-centric, genderless representation of carefree solitude amidst the colourful and vibrant brightness of nature. Its corporeality is abundant but also poignant in its lack of voyeuristic tricks and erotic stimulation, immune to an objectifying gaze. This is not a body for taking, this is a body-within-nature in which to disappear, under the eternal sunshine.

Most recently, feminist scholars have begun documenting an “explosion” of feminist aesthetic politics enacted and conveyed through various artistic forms and genres (de Hollanda, 2018, p. 75). Indeed, *Artivismo Feminista* [Feminist Artivism] has emerged as a feminist artistic movement that expresses itself critically in relation to the oppression experienced by women in Latin America. In the face of deepening socio-economic inequalities and growing violence, activism in Latin America has evolved into a medium of normative contestation, political provocation, and radical rejection of a *machista* [sexist] pattern of social relations. Although their political and critical contents are not recent, these art works have had little visibility and recognition in the past. Only in recent years have these feminist artistic manifestations gained a significant notoriety, mainly in urban public spaces (Costa & Coelho, 2018). Paulo Raposo (2015) contends that *artivism* is a conceptual neologism and floating signifier:

[Artivism] is still unstable both in terms of social sciences and the arts. It calls for connections, classic and prolix as well as controversial between art and politics, and stimulates the potential destinies of art as an act of resistance and subversion. It can be found in social and political interventions, produced by people or collectives, through poetic and performative strategies [...]. Its aesthetic and symbolic nature amplifies, sensitizes, reflects and interrogates themes and situations in a given social and historic context, aiming at change or resistance. Artivism consolidates itself this way as a cause and a social claim and simultaneously as an artistic rupture – namely, by proposing alternative scenarios,

landscapes and ecologies of fruition, participation and artistic creation. (Raposo, 2015, p. 5)

For André Mesquita (2012), activism (in general) and feminist activism (in particular) trespass on the definition of political art. Activism reaches far beyond seemingly obvious connotations of resistance and activates an alternative system of production relations and interdependencies:

Let's consider that activist art means not just political art, but a commitment to direct engagement with the forces of production not mediated by official mechanisms of representation. This non-mediation also comprises the construction of collective circuits of exchange and sharing, open to social participation and that, inevitably come into conflict with the different vectors of repressive forces of global capitalism and its system of relations between governments and corporations, the social reorganization of large cities, the media and entertainment monopoly by powerful groups, networks of influence, military industrial complex, religious orders, cultural, educational institutions, etc. (Mesquita, 2012, p. 17)

Not surprisingly, other examples of feminist activism in Latin America include the representation and acknowledgment of transsexual and LGBTQ+ groups, indigenous communities, and various marginalized groups whose bodies and experiences have been rendered invisible and thus unworthy of recognition by dominant cultural paradigms. Through artistic interventions, the ethos of inclusion and dignification of the excluded and oppressed derives a unique forcefulness from the political tradition of *a luta*. This tradition therefore engenders manifold modes of struggle for social justice in Latin America.

### **Feminist *luta* in Latin America**

Although the struggle of women against political oppression and economic exploitation has been a constant in Latin America since the beginning of colonial domination, it reached new levels from 1970, a decade when the region was exposed to the devastating consequences of globalization and a neoliberal agenda. Since women directly suffered the many crises affecting their communities, they created more autonomous forms of social reproduction, by redefining community practices that were broken by brutal economic policies and state terrorism. Indeed, activism driven by women is currently an important force for social change in Latin America and an inspiration for feminists and other social movements around the world. In challenging the destructive forces of capitalism and patriarchy, women are building new forms of existence that reject the logic of the market and reproductive health policies, and that channel powerful, affective relationships found in the domestic sphere towards the production of social solidarity. Their efforts not only redefine the meaning of “politics” and “democratization” but also recode feminism, transforming everyday social and reproductive work into collective action that converts neighbourhoods into communities of resistance against capitalist exploitation (Federici & Valio, 2020).

A new political role for women emerged: responding to an economic crisis that had engulfed Latin America since the mid-1970s. In most Latin American countries, this crisis followed a period of economic restructuring led by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, under the pretext of a “structural adjustment”. What followed was the dismantling of the public sector and the liberalization of trade, which destroyed local economies. In both rural and urban contexts,



women formed a primary node of resistance to mass unemployment and impoverishment, and their activities moved in many different directions (Federici & Valio, 2020). On the one hand, women engaged in intense struggles to defend the “common good” – land, forests, and water, as well as neighbourhoods threatened by gentrification. As a result, they also defended the cultural values, knowledge systems, and social identities that were being eviscerated, as land was being poisoned and as communities were being displaced. On the other hand, women also migrated to metropolitan centres and other countries to search for new forms of employment and income, where they joined a new informal economy of street vendors and sometimes even sold their own bodies (Federici & Valio, 2020). Lugones (2010) thus proposed a rereading of a “modern capitalist colonial modernity” through the lens of decolonial feminism: “the colonial imposition of gender cuts across questions of ecology, economics, government, relations with the spirit world, and knowledge, as well as across everyday practices that either habituate us to take care of the world or to destroy it” (p. 742).

Not surprisingly, women have played a central role in ecological struggles, given that their livelihoods and the wellbeing of their communities have been threatened by expropriation and natural degradation. It is women who must take care of those who become ill due to oil pollution, contaminated cooking water, toxic cleaning products, and malnutrition stemming from the loss of land and the destruction of local agriculture. For these reasons, women today remain at the frontline of *a luta* against transnational mining and agribusiness corporations that invade rural areas and poison the environment. According to the Ecuadorian scholar and activist Lisset Coba Mejía (2016), women lead the fight for water in the Amazon region. They are also the main opponents of oil extraction, as they are well aware that it harms the natural environment and “exacerbates machismo” (Mejia, 2016, p. 7). The wages earned by men in the oil industry not only deepen gender inequalities and increase alcohol consumption but also intensify violence against women (Martínez, 2014, pp. 42–45). “We cannot feed our children with oil”, exclaims Patricia Guallinga, Quechua leader of Sarayaku, a village in the Amazon rainforest. “We don’t want alcoholism, we don’t want prostitution, we don’t want men who attack us. We don’t want this life, because even if we are given schools, bathrooms, and zinc houses, it takes away our dignity” (Guallinga, 2014, pp. 48–50).

From the point of view of the epistemologies of the South (de Sousa Santos, 2018), struggles for dignity transform any margin of freedom – however small – into an opportunity for liberation, all-the-while accepting the inherent risks of such a transformation. They do so, less by choice than by necessity. The struggles of the oppressed assume an infinite number of forms – the most obvious are explicitly and deliberately created by social groups, organizations, and movements to either reduce or put an end to cases of unjust oppression. However, there are other forms of *a luta* that cannot be easily separated from the daily life of oppressed social groups. Since they do not involve direct confrontation or open and declared forms of resistance, they are rarely recognized as political. Rather, these instances of *a luta* form “everyday forms of resistance” when confronting material domination, “hidden transcripts” when confronting status domination, and “dissident subcultures” when confronting ideological domination (Scott, 1985, p. 198).

Individuals and social groups have the opportunity to express both active and passive resistance when fighting oppression and injustice. In some cases, passive resistance prepares the way for

active engagement. The nature of such engagement – and its affective triggers – determines which means and resources are mobilized to articulate an action of dissent (de Sousa Santos, 2018).

As witnessed by many across Latin America and beyond, the spectacle of heartless indifference toward the least privileged and the most vulnerable during the COVID-19 pandemic unveiled new depths of *vergonha alheia*, moral disgrace and shame invoked in others. However, a new battlefield of righteous indignation was also created for those willing to transform acutely-felt shame into creative utterance. Without the possibility of gatherings, artists and activists needed to invent new ways to take up *a luta*, making use of very few tools at their disposal – domestic space, social media, and confined body.

In the next section, we present examples of feminist activism created by two Brazilian women who found different yet inimitably poignant ways to transform their *vergonha alheia* into resonant artistic declarations during the COVID-19 pandemic. We intertwine their artistic and activist work during the pandemic with the analysis of the performative and normative commonalities of their works, which we interpret as *indignação* and *declaração corporal*.

### **Brazilian activism during the COVID-19 pandemic: *Indignação* and *Declaração corporal***

*Art is not committed to the truth, but to esthesia or sensitivity. Thus, art shows itself but does not demonstrate.* [translation by the authors]  
Julio Plaza (2003)

To reveal how feminist activism can generate new primary knowledge that unveils the experience of oppression (i.e., one that accounts for “the colonial difference”), we analyse selected art works from two perspectives. First, we bring attention to the form of sensitivity that feminist art has expressed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil. Second, we offer a feminist reading of the aesthetic medium that has been employed to convey and construct new existential, social, and political meanings unleashed by the pandemic.

#### ***Indignação as a form of sensitivity***

The unprecedented lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic has placed many artists in a dilemma of relevance. How can an artist remain connected to their audiences and show solidarity with their fellow human beings? Some performers have produced reassuring videos and messages on social media, appearing casually and conveying proximity and optimism through cyberspace. These well-intended, virtual consolations have not always been received with gratitude nor admiration, as they demonstrate an abysmal degree of detachment from the reality of those who experience lockdown as an existential threat (i.e., the millions of people who are living in precarious conditions). Others have chosen to remain relevant by continuing their professional activities (e.g., organizing virtual concerts, streaming performances from their homes, and creating brief escapes from fear and uncertainty) that provided a pleasant and stupefying forgetfulness of death.

Even though the COVID-19 pandemic is ravaging Brazil, very few people in the country have had the privilege of protecting themselves from its risks. In the absence of adequate state support and public concern, millions of domestic workers assume significant risks and continue to work in the

houses of rich, white, and comfort-addicted fellow citizens. Juliana Teixeira (2020) confirms that Brazil has more domestic workers than many other countries. The bourgeois family model (Teixeira, Saraiva, & Carrieri, 2015) is based on both colonialism and structural racism, which is inseparable from gender-based violence forcing women (i.e., mostly black women) into the most vulnerable socioeconomic conditions. Two women, Adriana Calcanhotto and Debora Diniz, turned their *vergonha alheia* – concerning intersectional oppression in Brazil exacerbated by the pandemic – into public indignation that materialized in two artistic projects: a song and a series of portraits. Their aesthetic articulations of indignation over normalized social violence convert shame into a daring and resonating endeavour of collective soul-searching.

### *A Song*

Since staying at home is not a choice available to Brazilian domestic workers, the suppression of the right to life exposes how the necropolitics against Black Brazilians operate. Mirtes Santana, a single mother of 33, was one of these Black women. On Tuesday, June 2nd, 2020, Mirtes went to the home of Sarí Corte Real, the wife of the mayor of Tamandaré, in the rich neighbourhood of Recife, the fifth largest city in Brazil. She had to take her five-year-old son, Miguel Otávio, with her, as he could not be left alone and there were no other available care options. Upon arrival, Mirtes was asked to take the mistress’s dog out for a walk and leave the boy behind. “We will take care of him” she was told. Returning from the walk 30 minutes later, she encountered the dying body of her son on the pavement outside the luxury seaside apartment block. Miguel had plunged nine stories, after having been left alone in a lift by his mother’s employer who had promised to take care of him. He died in hospital two hours later (Phillips, 2020). The tragic, avoidable death of Miguel Otávio stunned Brazil. It caused wide-spread indignation and served as an ugly reminder of Brazil’s history – its slave-owning past and its deeply-rooted patterns of racism. Many were shocked, but some were ashamed.

Adriana Calcanhotto considered this event as an apotheosis of everything that was wrong in Brazilian society (e.g., precarious domestic work, corruption, and injustices in the legal system). In September 2020, Adriana rented an empty theatre space to perform the song “2 de Junho”, to express her *vergonha alheia* prompted by the tragedy. Her performance space was empty, featuring only a Brazilian flag in the background that had a gaping black hole in the centre where the words “*ordem e progresso*” [“order and progress”] usually appear – the soul of darkness, the bottomless void of heartlessness, the apotheosis of indifference. Our indignation may not be sufficient to pierce it, but we must find courage to behold it and cry out in horror.

### **Insert Figure 2 here**

<i>2 de Junho</i>	<i>June 2nd</i>
No país negro e racista	In the black and racist country
No coração da América Latina	In the heart of Latin America
Na cidade do Recife	In the city of Recife
Terça feira 2 de junho de dois mil e vinte	Tuesday, June 2, two thousand twenty
Vinte e nove graus Celsius	Twenty-nine degrees Celsius

Céu claro  
 Sai pra trabalhar a empregada  
 Mesmo no meio da pandemia  
 E por isso ela leva pela mão  
 Miguel, cinco anos  
 Nome de anjo  
 Miguel Otávio  
 Primeiro e único  
 Trinta e cinco metros de voo  
 Do nono andar  
 Cinquenta e nove segundos antes de sua...

Clear sky  
 Maid, go out to work  
 Even in the middle of the pandemic  
 And so she takes him by the hand  
 Miguel, five years old  
 The name of an angel  
 Miguel Otávio  
 The one and only  
 Thirty-five meters of flight  
 From the ninth floor  
 Fifty-nine seconds before your...

The performance of Adriana led to the creation of the *Instituto Menino Miguel* [The Institute of Menino Miguel] by the Federal Rural University of Pernambuco. The activities developed at the Institute move research, teaching, and extension toward the logic of human care, childhood, and families. The Institute also focuses on training tutelary and legal counsellors (Fonsêca, 2020).

Wearing a t-shirt that read “*ela não teve paciência para cuidar*” [she had no patience to care] – referring to her former *patroa* [mistress], Mirtes thanked Adriana Calcanhotto for the song she composed for her son Miguel and participated in an online Instagram event (September 18, 2020) where Adriana sang the song in his honour, and where affective exchanges took place. Mirtes also shared her feelings during the live event: “Miguel is the son and grandson of Brazil because everyone seeks the same thing, justice”. All royalties received for playing the song go to the *Instituto Menino Miguel*.

#### *A series of portraits*

Since the first days of the pandemic in March 2020, the activist Debora Diniz created the project *Relicários* [Reliquary],<sup>3</sup> which publishes daily texts and images created by visual artist Ramon Navarro to honour women who have died due to COVID-19. The project creates a womanistic community of care that shares stories, cherishes histories, dignifies lives lost, and offers support to women in Latin American and Caribbean countries. Debora described the aim of the project:

The idea of the Reliquary came from the anxiety that so many of us feel about people who, among crowds, die in the pandemic, become numbers and lose their biographies. One of the many terrible effects of such an overwhelming pandemic is the desensitization to grief, the right to feel the loss. The Instagram account was the way that Ramon Navarro and I found to try to resist this process. The account kick was the first death by Covid-19 recorded in Rio de Janeiro. Cleonice Gonçalves was 63 years old, was a domestic worker since she was 13, took care of the youngest of nine brothers, and after her son and nephews. She lived in the municipality of Miguel Pereira, worked in a house in Leblon, two buses and a train away, during 20 years. The *patroa* [mistress] had traveled to Italy at the carnival and returned from there with Covid-19, went into quarantine, but did not warn Cleonice what

<sup>3</sup> *Relicários* [Reliquary] is available at <https://www.instagram.com/reliquia.rum/>.

was going on. On March 19, while the mistress was recovering at home, Cleonice died. In the first news about the case, there was no name of Cleonice, and as the number of deaths grew, this became common in covering the crisis. Cleonice's death says a lot about the country's inequalities, which are exacerbated by the pandemic, but when we made the first Instagram post on March 23, we didn't even know her name (Pinol Sarmiento, 2020).

**Insert Figure 3 here**

We present four selected images and commentaries from this project, found on the Instagram account of Debora Diniz (@reliquia.rum). We interpret these posts as womanist portrayals of loss that were triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Insert Figure 4 here**

The first post of the Instagram account @reliquira.rum reads:

The first woman to die in Rio de Janeiro is nameless. We know she was a maid. She died because she was not told that her mistress was ill.

She left children. She left us with the scar of what makes colonial heritage in this country. [art: @ramondebh] (translation by the authors)

**Insert Figure 5 here**

An excerpt from another Instagram post, dated September 2, 2020, reads:

There have already been seven women in her city. She was the only indigenous and pregnant woman. First the foetus died, then her. I don't know if she already had children.

She died at the age of 31, in the Apucarantina Indigenous Land, Paraná.

Art is not explained. In the boldness of uttering what is seen, an attempt to offer more words to the mourning.

The cheeks are girlish. The fringe in two layers looks more like curves of life that were not made. Looks from the side, she looks at us from the side. There are flowers and music that don't seem to belong to her people. Who knows if the artist did it right: it is the remnants of the outside world that took the virus to the inside world. It rains in the woods, and the water does not wet her body. [art: @ramondebh] (translation by the authors)

**Insert Figure 6 here**

One further post, dated a few days later on September 13, 2020, reads:

The name was sweet, the profession was caring. Nurse who cherished those who arrive in the world.

She died at the age of 63, in Brasília, Distrito Federal.

Art is not explained. In the boldness of uttering what is seen, an attempt to offer more words to the mourning.

The photo is almost a bust in remembrance of someone important. She was. The ones who admire her are the ones who came into the world by her, who were cared for by her. The white dress blends with the petals of imaginary flowers, and the image itself looks more like a wallpaper. Even birds come to get the flowery image with roots in life. She looks at us as if she knows. [art: @ramondebh] (translation by the authors)

### **Insert Figure 7 here**

Finally, a post, dated July 31, 2020, reads:

Four deaths in the city. Hers, the most recent one. Nothing is known about her. Don't know if she liked to dance.

She died at the age of 82, Araruna, Paraná. [art: @ramondebh] (translation by the authors)

These sympathetic portrayals provide a sharp contrast to the narcissistic, social campaigns of female self-flattering among those who have the time and the resources to engage in such activities. The *Relicários* project dignifies deaths that have been treated as inevitable casualties of the calamity, never mourned, never noticed. The rich and irreplaceable existence of these women, forced into social obscurity during their lifetimes, finally finds redemption in this dignified mourning of loss.

### ***Declaração corporal as a medium of meaning creation***

Since the 1970s, the female body has been employed by performance artists, such as Marina Abramovic, as tool to transmit new meanings and to provoke viewers into radically different modes of reflexivity. What started as an experiential and aesthetic innovation evolved into a political feminist project where artists like Bracha Ettinger have sought to create a new type of ethics of relationality. In this space, the body – and bodily vulnerability – define us as relational beings (Kenny & Fotaki, 2015). Ettinger shifted away from an abstract level of disembodied ethical injunction and developed a model of ethical response emphasizing an affective mode of being, felt in – and through – the body. According to Ettinger, materiality and corporeality become foundational sources for creating existential, political, and social meaning: “we must return to the body because the body can be killed” (Kenny & Fotaki, 2015, p. 192).

In a similar manner, Adriana Calcanhotto and Debora Diniz depart from abstract responsiveness to ‘the other’, positioning responsibility for the other as a deeply embodied experience: the other co-habits and co-exists with ‘the I’ and the body declares and affirms this relationality.

### *The Big Clip of the Quarantine*

At first not knowing exactly how to do something meaningful during the months of the COVID-19 pandemic, Adriana decided to transform her creative impulses into an experiment that would neither reassure nor provide escape. It was a daring call for action: “A musa não se medusa. Contra o caos, faz música” [The muse does not *meduse*. Against chaos, she makes music].

A mesmerizing, uninterrupted 28-minute film performance – “*Só*”. *O Clipão da Quarentena* [“*Alone*”. *The Big Clip of Quarantine*], shot in a single take and premiered on May 28, 2020 – features Adriana playing at the borders of intellectual improvisation and bodily provocation. Wearing white pyjamas, she transforms the mundane, domestic space into a theatrical, imaginative feast. The camera focuses on her body, constantly in motion, exposing poetic restlessness and vivifying playfulness. By bringing into the frame random objects of domesticity – a sandglass, a book, cleaning gloves, a toy prism, a crystal ball, Adriana constructs symbolic interpretations that assemble words, sounds, artefacts, and movements into a constellation of *declarações corporais* [bodily declarations]. These declarations expose the richness of the entire spectrum of emotions that a living body can experience in a confined environment – tenderness, fatigue, anguish, joy, inquisitiveness, longing. The living body is a testimony of the unbreakable connection with another living body that – though physically distant – responds to its rhythm, recognizes its energy, and follows its calling. This artistic experiment reveals a different form of searching: it is a searching for a form of connectedness and dialogue that does not commence with misguided (or even false) assumptions concerning the commonality of experience (i.e., all confined bodies go through the same shit in this pandemic). Instead, the bodily declarations of Adriana are an invitation to join a spontaneous game of imagination, on our own terms and with our own conditions – with our heart, with our mind, and with our irreducible longing to break free.

Furthermore, in her clip, Adriana does not follow pre-determined formats and manages to combine corporeal improvisations with the lyrics igniting political awareness. In one of the opening songs of the *Big Clip of the Quarantine* “Bunda Lê Lê” [Le Le Ass] she takes a political stance asking people to “put their asses down and study” and desecrating an ostensible anti-intellectualism of the country’s economic and political elites. In “Sol Quadrado” [Squared Sun] she calls to “get up to come and see the squared sun ” alluding to the impunity culture in Brazil that protects privileged individuals from judicial prosecution while indiscriminately incarcerating entire groups of favela residents most of whom are black.

Dancing to the funk and samba rhythms in the clip shows empathy and inclusiveness. It can be considered a form of aesthetic transgression with a political underpinning since funk comes from favelas and is perceived by many white Brazilians as inferior type of music (da Costa Trotta, 2016; Moreira, 2017).

The *Big Clip of the Quarantine* is a vivid manifestation of how a subjectivity engages with broader social and political forces by intertwining corporeal and psychic (imaginative) realities (Fotaki and Harding, 2017).

## Insert Figure 8 here

### *Embellishment of the female body*

The creative power of the work of Diniz lies in its fusion of *indignação* and *declaração corporal*, where words palpitate with shame and an aestheticized embodiment of anonymous death personifies and resuscitates a unique spirit. According to Debora Diniz on her Instagram account:

Art is not explained. It dares to speak about what is seen, takes an attempt to offer more words to the mourning. Where do I find my hope? In the emergence of feminist solidarity. The crowd that dies becomes a statistic. And statistics dehumanizes. We wanted to show pieces of those lives (relics). To consider deaths that can be our deaths. To remember is to resist. Grief is a political act. The resulting photos exude intimacy and warmth, revering their subjects and exposing the oppression they faced. They are topics that society doesn't look at and our intention is to encourage people to dare to look. [translation by the authors]

The portrait works of Debora Diniz invite the viewer to feel as though they are part of a different kind of community that echoes womanistic ideals of diversity and draws attention to the awe-inspiring uniqueness of lost life – symbolized by blooming flowers and the abundant wonders of nature. In these pictures, we see *a cara do Brasil* [the face of Brazil] – a mix of indigenous, black, and white peoples, the “mix of 3 races”, with all its contradictions, and an account of the history that embodies “the colonial difference”.

The activism of Debora Diniz also leads the observer to consider the womanistic values expressed by Alice Walker (1983), who defines a womanist as a “black feminist or feminist of color” who loves other women and/or men sexually and/or non-sexually, appreciates and prefers the culture, the emotional flexibility, and the strength of women, and is committed to the “survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (Walker, 1983, p. 11). Walker (1983) emphasizes behaviour, which is – at the same time – responsible and playful, fearless, and compassionate. In her more metaphorical definition of womanism, the “[w]omanist is to feminist as purple to lavender” (Walker, 1983, p. 12). As Montelaro (1996) notes, “[a]ccording to the semantic analogue she constructs, an exclusively white, bourgeois feminism literally pales in comparison to the more wide-ranging, nonexclusive womanist concerns represented by the rich and undiluted color purple” (p. 14).

### **Discussion: Overcoming “the colonial difference” and bearing witness**

*Heaven knows we need never be ashamed of our tears, for they are rain upon the blinding dust of earth, overlying our hard hearts. I was better after I had cried, than before--more sorry, more aware of my own ingratitude, more gentle.*

Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*



*There is one thing that has disappeared, not just from the U.S. but from the entire world,  
is the idea of ever being embarrassed by anything.*  
Fran Lebowitz

A poetic definition of art emphasises the translation of feelings into affirmations. As expressed by Susan Sontag in her essay, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), affirmative empathy can be interrogated by positioning “[c]ompassion [as] an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or it withers” (p. 101). We develop this insight by contending that art created out of pity and art created out of shame result in two very different political resonances. *Feminist aesthetic politics* – as a form of activism – transcends the purely cultural impetus of *gender aesthetics* to engender a radically different approach to engaging and confronting multiple regimes of oppression.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have witnessed that inequalities and oppression not only accentuated questions about capitalism but also raised – more broadly – questions concerning how we live out our lives on this planet and how we comprehend our interdependence and shared vulnerability. According to Latour (2021), the contrast between the “where we are” and “who we are” viewpoints has sharpened during the pandemic, making the first one more pertinent. We contend that both interrogations are equally important because self-definition and self-regard play a crucial role in defining how we relate to and interpret our current context. Further, we assert that the direction and authenticity of such interrogations are largely determined by how we feel about the world. Specifically, we argue that a particular form of shame – *vergonha alheia* [the shame on behalf of others] – releases society from its mental and moral stultification by forcing us to confront both questions with brutal honesty.

In the work of Calcanhotto and Diniz, we discern various symbolic manifestations of honesty and engagement with the questions of “where we are” and “who we are”. We also find manifestations of moral indignation (e.g., the symbol of a Brazilian flag with a black hole in the place of “order and progress”), indicative of *where we are* in terms of social justice and equality. We show how spontaneous games of the body in familiar domestic spaces can generate new sensibilities about *who we are* and elucidate new ways of comprehending *where we are* – connected with the world through different ethics of (paying) attention and remaining responsive to the vital energy and torment of the other (Weil, 2013). As pointed out by Madalaki and Daou (2021a) living in the sphere of this constant self-interrogation may be an uncomfortable but yet necessary exercise of turning to our bodies to provide answers that words fail to give in a convincing manner.

What unites the work of Adriana Calcanhotto and Debora Diniz is a determination to leave a memory of the COVID-19 pandemic for “posterity” – to document it, live through it, and feel it through existentially meaningful and emotionally honest art that bears witness to its torments and prompts emotional engagement. This determination speaks directly to the importance of the aesthetic in the articulation of remembering and bearing witness to “*bring out of the dark the places embedded in us... and share these with the world in hopes of making these knowable to ourselves and to others*” (Mandalaki and Daou, 2021a, p. 1922). Both artists achieve this by focusing on the body as a medium of communication – a transmitter of declarative statements about oppression and relatedness. Their activism leads us to refer to broader concepts of feminism from Latin

American thinkers, such as the concept of *Amefricanidade*, developed by the Brazilian Lélia Gonzalez (1988). *Amefricanidade* is a new and creative viewpoint focusing on the historical-cultural formation of Brazil, which – for reasons of geographical and, above all, unconscious nature – is not what is generally communicated to the world. Overall, Brazil is a country whose formations of the unconscious are exclusively European, and white. However, it is also an African America, whose *latinidade* – largely considered non-existent – has a letter changed from “t” to “d” to have its name assumed with all the letters: *Améfrica Ladina*.<sup>4</sup> In this context, all Brazilians – not solely Blacks and Browns from the census – are *ladino amefricanos*. For a better understanding of the tricks of racism characterized here, it is necessary to remember the Freudian category of denial [*denegação*]. Denying the *ladino-amefricanidade*, Brazilian racism not only turns against those who are its living testimony (i.e., Blacks) but also denies their existence (i.e., Brazilian “racial democracy”). Gonzalez’s (1988) concept of *Amefricanidade* inspires reflections concerning the ways in which unbearable events – such as the death of Miguel and the loss of an astounding number of black lives during the pandemic – take place, causing shock but not surprise. Consequently, engaging in an act of bearing witness that catalyses the collective feeling of shame turns into an action of political defiance that speaks up for injustices and vulnerabilities (Ahonen et al., 2020; Mandalaki and Daou, 2021b).

*Indignação* – as a form of an aesthetically articulated sensitivity towards the pain of the other – thus becomes a fundamental requirement for political awakening. According to Lugones (2010), one cannot recognize and comprehend oppression without questioning the essence of one’s sensitivity to the experience of the oppressed other. Indignation is the fuel for affirmations that translate into action.

Using the body as a means to release shame and transmit sensitivity to the other is also pertinent as the body holds the performative power to express a resonant political declaration (Butler, 2015; Daskalaki et al., 2019). The declarative power of the body is closely linked with the intercorporeal ethics of relationality presented by Ettinger, whereby the matrixial gaze is not only employed as a symbolic device but also as a material practice that connects us to others, irrespective of anatomy and identification as female, male, or otherwise. This perspective offers a deeper theorization that encompasses the sharing of embodied space and inter-subject experiences of trauma and affect, along with the traces of memory induced by a persistent legacy of oppression (Kenny & Fotaki, 2015). Drawing on Fotaki and Harding (2017), we thus assert that body-centric artwork elucidates the beauty and grievability of each life fostering collective capabilities for compassion and care. As both authors remind us - “*If we dream of organizations as peopled by such beings, with their fragilities, sensitivities and egotistical needs, the wonder and value of each and every life and how each of us depends on so many others for our sustenance, then we may be able to write of organizations and their futures in ways that have never been written before*” (p. 191). Our study contributes to this much needed shift towards relational subjectivities by extending the aesthetic perspective of relational ethics and corporeal reality through the combined sensitizing powers of the visual, the lyrical and the poetic.

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<sup>4</sup> It is not by chance that Brazilian cultural neurosis has in racism its symptom *par excellence*.

Finally, *Indignação* and *declaração corporal* epitomize an epistemological endeavour that is able to account for “the colonial difference” (Lugones, 2010, p. 743) that motivates oppression in Latin America. Our exploration draws from the notion of coloniality, which refers to “the process of active reduction of people, the dehumanization that fits them for the classification, the process of subjectification, [and] the attempt to turn the colonized into less than human being” (Lugones, 2010, p. 746). However, we also draw from broader tenets of decolonial feminism (Lugones, 2010; Spivak, 1988) that rejects a universalist representation of oppression by distinguishing between varying, context-driven types of reality and questions how these distinctions come into being in the first place. Decolonial feminist scholars cast continuous violence against women in the Global South as an outcome of three modes of domination: capitalist, colonial, and patriarchal. According to Lugones (2010), the preoccupation of neoliberal Western feminists with the problems of patriarchy led to an epistemological inability to account for differences between the experience of marginalization in metropolitan societies and colonial territories. Thus, social research must not only stimulate new ways of comprehending how others experience oppression but also account for “the colonial difference” (Lugones, 2010, p. 743).

The analysed art works vividly illustrate that, unlike colonization, coloniality persists at the intersection of gender, class, and race – the core constructs of a capitalistic system of power.

By exposing the intersectionality of oppression – revealing and cherishing female bodies denied full humanity and sacrificed in the name of privilege maintenance and reproduction, Adriana Calcanhotto and Debora Diniz proclaim their performative power to account for “the colonial difference”. Female bodies, including those of the artists, are used to not only represent but also mobilize, through poignant and original declarative statements. In blunt terms, they show “*who the woman is*” and “*how she can speak*” (Fotaki and Harding, 2017, p.5) with the unique energy, beauty, and fortitude of her indignation and of her body.

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## Figures



Figure 1: *Abaporu* (1928) by Tarsila do Amaral (1886–1973). Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires [Latin American Art Museum of Buenos Aires].





Figure 2: *2 de Junho* [June 2nd] (premiered on Sept 18, 2020) by Adriana Calcanhotto (b. 1965). Available on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/Myob26bhNqs>.



Figure 3: “Minha esperança é que não possamos mais evitar falar sobre nossa interdependência” [My hope is that we can no longer avoid talking about our interdependence]. Debora Diniz Rodrigues (b. 1970). Photo by Pinol Sarmiento (2020).

## Portrayal 1. Nameless heroine



Figure 4: First post (March 23, 2020). Instagram account @reliquia.rum. Art: @ramondebh.

## Portrayal 2. Forest nymph

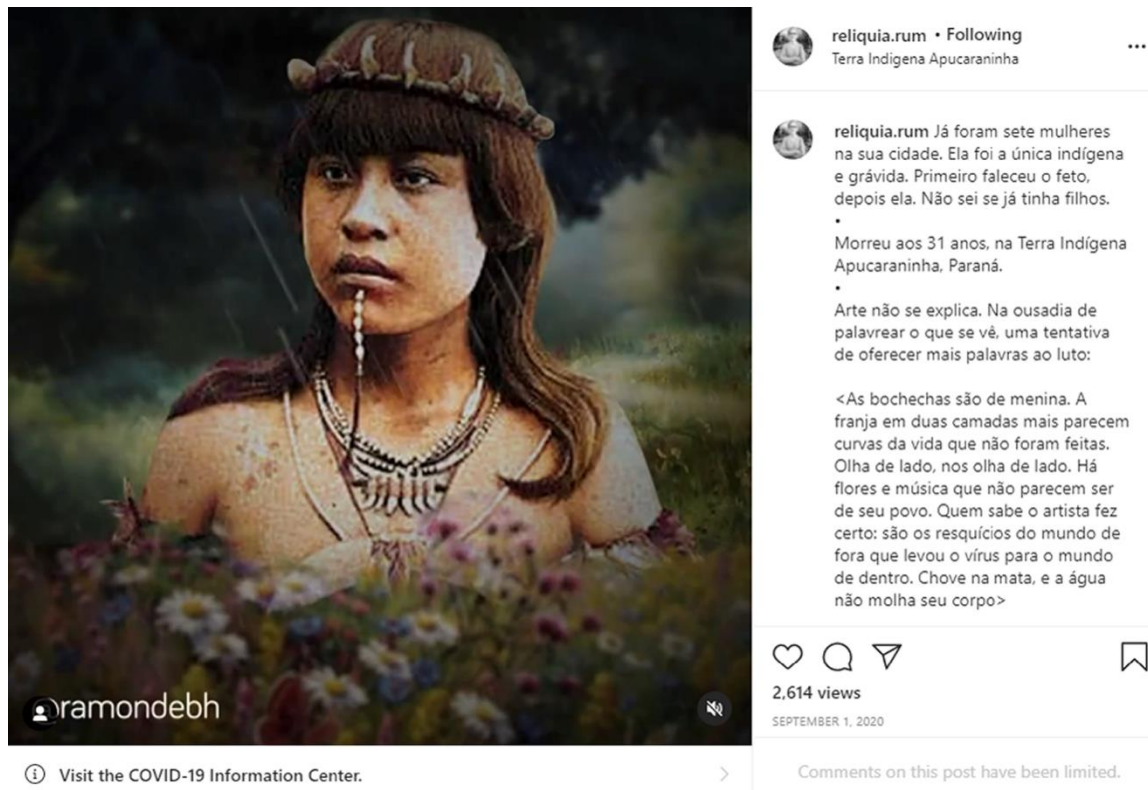


Figure 5: Post (September 1, 2020). Instagram account @reliquia.rum. Art: @ramondebh.



### Portrayal 3. Angel of care



Figure 6: Post (September 1, 2020). Instagram account @reliquia.rum. Art: @ramondebh.

#### Portrayal 4. Lady in white



Figure 7: Post (July 31, 2020). Instagram account @reliquia.rum. Art: @ramondebh.

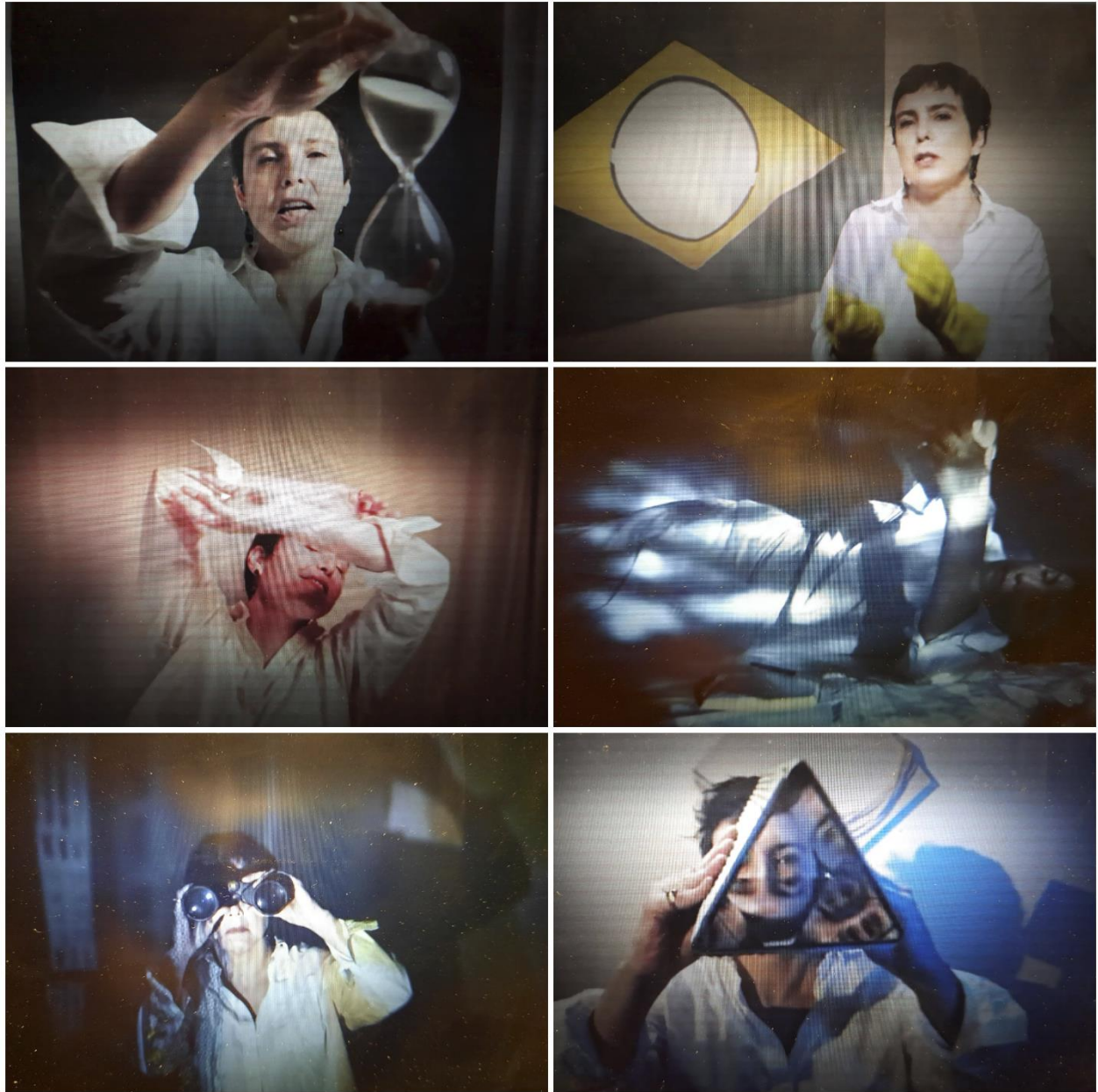


Figure 8: “Só”. *O Clipão da Quarentena* [“Alone”. *The Big Clip of Quarantine*] (premiered on May 28, 2020) by Adriana Calcanhotto (b. 1965). Available on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/1TMhfkf-ajY>.